DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 708 FL 025 206

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TITLE	The Status of Foreign Languages in the Elementary School in Austin: Is the Spirit Still Willing and the FLES Still Weak?
PUB DATE	1995-00-00
NOTE	15p.; For related document, see FL 025 200.
PUB TYPE	Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Evaluative (142)
JOURNAL CIT	Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education; v2 n1 Spr 1995
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	After School Programs; Articulation (Education); Course Content; Elementary Education; Enrollment Rate; Financial Support; *FLES; *Language Enrollment; Language Research; Language Teachers; Program Design; Program Evaluation; Public Policy; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; *Second Language Programs; Surveys; Teacher Qualifications
IDENTIFIERS	*Texas (Austin)

ABSTRACT

A 1994 study investigated foreign language instruction in the elementary schools (FLES) in Austin, Texas. Data were drawn from telephone interviews with school personnel, from documents and records at the state department of education, and from visits to schools offering FLES instruction. The report presents information on the seven school districts of the county in which Austin is located, highlighting the number of students enrolled in FLES programs, basic characteristics of existing programs (languages taught, primary goals, teachers, program structure, materials and teaching methods, articulation between levels, funding and support, evaluation, major problems), findings concerning the socioeconomic character of the communities under study, and implications for extending and strengthening foreign language instruction. Both in-school and after-school programs are considered. Contains 51 references. (MSE)

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The Status of Foreign Language in the Elementary School in Austin: Is the Spirit Still Willing and the FLES Still Weak?

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FL025 206

The Status of Foreign Language in the Elementary School in Austin: Is the Spirit Still Willing and the FLES Still Weak?

ZENA T. MOORE and ANGELA RAMSAY

This paper reports an investigation into foreign language instruction in elementary schools in the city of Austin. The findings indicate that a very small percentage of students (28%) study a foreign language, 17% in regular classes and 11% in after school classes. These classes vary in structure and intensity, lacked articulation with other classes, lacked adequately trained teachers and occurred in schools which were financially able to afford them. The findings point to the need for state mandated programs which would be coordinated and supervised by trained personnel.

INTRODUCTION

One of the many criticisms aimed at the profession is the lack of interest in, and the scarcity of research topics relating to, foreign language education at the elementary school level. A review of the last three decades of literature does indeed provide ample evidence that the bulk of research continues to focus on foreign language education at the secondary and college levels. Nevertheless, leaders in the field do recognize the need for longer contact hours, and do recommend that foreign language instruction begin at the elementary school level. Six years ago, in 1989, the National Priorities Conference hosted by ACTFL stated that:

> A primary goal in the next decade is to work actively to increase the number of high-quality, carefully designed elementary school foreign language programs based on a strong administrative, parental and community support. *This will ensure that every child, regardless of learning style, achievement level, race/ethnic origin, socioeconomic status, home language or future academic goals,* may begin language learning early and continue the language in a long, well-articulated sequence of carefully developed curriculum. (Met & Rhodes, p. 438)

Still, progress continues to be slow. In 1988 a national survey showed that only 22% of the elementary schools surveyed offered foreign languages. Texas was at that time one of two states in the process of considering the establishment of such requirements (Rosenbusch, 1985). That was seven years ago. To date no such requirements have been mandated. Texas is still one of the forty-two states in the nation that have not officially mandated Foreign Language Education in the Elementary School (FLES) programs. Texas is also one of those states that do not require high school students to pursue foreign language study. Does that mean that Texas has fallen behind other more progressive states?

This certainly appears to be the case if we examine what is taking place around the country. In December 1988, for example, the Arizona State Board of Education passed a mandate requiring that all elementary schools in Arizona initiate a foreign language program in at least one grade level by the year 1991-1992.. It is hoped that by the year 1999 a foreign language will be offered to all grades K-8. Arizona is perhaps the state most similar to Texas in terms of its proximity to

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Mexico and in the ethnic composition of its school population. The Arizona FLES mandate is seen as a positive response to the growing educational needs of the diverse student population that fills the public schools.

Although there is no similar mandate that directs compulsory foreign language instruction in the schools, the Texas Board of Education vigorously encourages enrollment in foreign language classes. For example, the Recommended High School Plan includes a foreign language option for graduation, the Advanced High School Program includes two units of foreign language study, and the proposed Project EXCELL, (Excellence and Challenge: Expectations for Language Learners), currently being drafted, calls for specific foreign language requirements and standardization at all school levels. As a result of these efforts the number of students studying foreign languages has steadily increased, albeit very slowly, over the last decade, rising from 12.7 % in the 1981-82 school year to 19.3 % in 1991-92, a slow but steady 7% increase in ten years. This increase averages out to less than 1% per year.

The increase, however small, is heartening in light of the fact that foreign languages, as of 1994, will now be included as part of the core curriculum for all school children nationwide with instruction beginning at the kindergarten level. Is Texas ready for the challenges demanded by such a policy? What do we know of foreign language education at the elementary school level in Texas?

THE STUDY

In the Fall of 1994 this study was undertaken with the sole purpose of gathering information about FLES in the city of Austin. The intention was to add to the existing database on FLES programs throughout the state of Texas as a whole. Data were collected from telephone interviews with relevant school personnel, from documents and records at the state department in Austin and from visits made to schools that offered FLES instruction.

This paper presents information on the seven school districts in the Travis County in which the city of Austin is located. Because of the length and scope of the study, the paper highlights only the following: (a) the number of students enrolled in foreign language programs, (b) an overview of the basic characteristics of the existing FLES programs, (c) some findings based on the socioeconomic character of the school communities, and (d) the implications for extension and strengthening of foreign language instruction.

FINDINGS

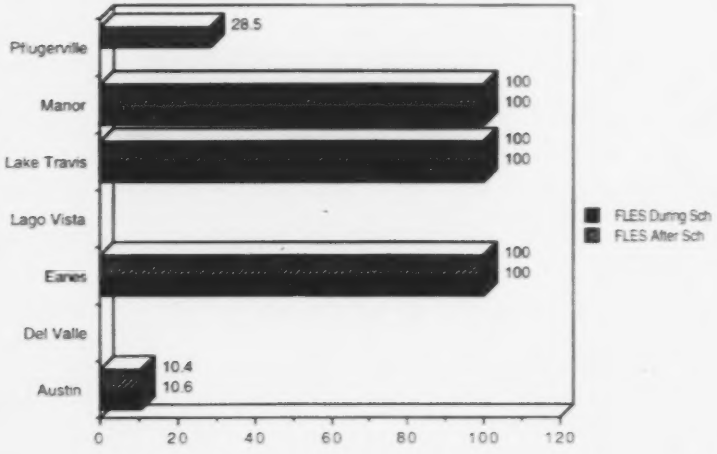
Student Enrollment

There are eight-six elementary schools in the seven school districts with a total population of 49,298 students. Of the seven school districts only five offered any type of foreign language instruction, and this to only some students. In all only 28% of the elementary school children, or 14,097 students, in the Travis County, studied a foreign language. Of that 28%, only 17%, that is 8,502 students, were enrolled in classes during regular school hours. The remaining 11%, or 5,595, participated in after-school programs. Table 1 presents the data on school districts and FLES offerings.

Table 1. Student Enrollment in Travis County by School Districts

School Districts	No of Schools	Student Enrollment	Existence of FLES Programs
Lago Vista	1	334	None
Del Valle	5	2,591	None
Pflugerville	7	4,245	After school programs at two of its 7 schools
Eanes	5	3,047	YES K-5
Lake Travis	1	1,234	YES K-5
Manor	1	782	YES K-6.
Austin	66	37,065	YES at 9 schools
TOTALS	86	49,298 School Enrollment	14,097 FLES Enrollment

Figure 1. FLES Instruction in Travis County School Districts



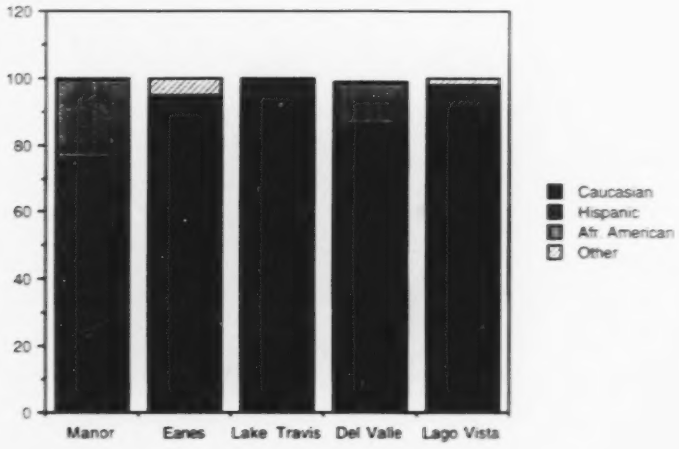
Findings revealed that of the seven school districts, only three, Eanes, Lake Travis and Manor, offered FLES instruction to all their students. Such instruction took place either during the regular school hours or in after-school programs. Of

the remaining four school districts only nine schools had foreign language offerings, and of these, two were in Pflugerville and seven were in Austin. It is notable that Del Valle and Lago Vista, with a joint student enrollment of 2,925, had no foreign language offering. Figure 1 presents a graphic depiction of FLES offerings and school districts.

Further examination of the data-revealed that, according to the student ethnic distribution statistics of 1993-1994, two of the three school districts with the greatest FLES activity, Eanes and Lake Travis, also had the highest enrollment of Caucasian students, while Del Valle, with the highest percentage of Hispanic students, was one of the two districts that had no foreign language offering. There appeared to be some relationship between ethnicity, family income and FLES. However, when we examined the Manor School District profiles we saw that it had the most ethnically balanced student enrollment, yet in spite of this, ranked equally with Eanes and Lake Travis with respect to its FLES offerings.

Nevertheless, data revealed not only that Eanes and Lake Travis had the oldest FLES programs and a majority Caucasian student enrollment, but that they also had the lowest percentage of economically disadvantaged students, and a very small percentage of Limited English Proficiency students. Details presented in Figure 2 were taken from Austin ISD 1993-1994 report on ethnic composition.

Figure 2. Ethnic Distribution in School Districts



Findings reported above suggest that there were two factors apparently influencing FLES offerings in schools. One appeared to be the ethnic composition of the student body and the other the socio-economic standing of the community. In

most schools FLES programs were generally regarded as enrichment programs, and did not form part of the core curriculum. Therefore, if the school was unable to fund them and parents were also unable to pay, foreign language programs could not exist. Data did indicate that the FLES programs in Eanes, Lake Travis, and Manor and four of the Austin programs were funded by the school, and in two other Austin schools parents paid an annual fee of 70 dollars.

It would appear, then, that schools with families of relatively high socio-economic status which were capable of supporting FLES programs did offer such instruction to their students. Schools with a high percentage of Hispanic students, larger numbers of LEP students and a greater number of lower income families generally did not have FLES programs.

FLES During School

1. Languages Taught

Only two foreign languages are taught in the Travis county schools, fifteen schools offer instruction in Spanish and one school offers Latin. The major reasons for choosing Spanish were proximity to Mexico, the presence of a large community of Spanish speakers, and the availability of teachers. In the single school where Latin is taught, the coordinator believed that it was "the only nonpolitical choice in such an ethnically diverse area as Austin." (interview with the coordinator)

2. Primary Goals

All FLES programs contained well-defined language and cultural goals for their students. These included a respect for cultural differences, the development of survival language skills, and the provision of a foundation for the continuation of foreign language study at the secondary school level. Eanes School District had established standardized objectives across all programs with the expressed purpose of establishing some type of articulation between grade levels.

The goals of the Latin program included the desire to embrace the culture of Rome, to foster awareness of cultural differences, and also to improve English language skills. This program model was based on one developed for inner city children in Los Angeles to improve their English vocabulary and literacy. This was an interesting finding since Eanes school district is one of the most affluent in the county and does not have many LEP students.

3. Teacher Information

The number of FLES teachers varied according to schools, programs and enrollment. Some schools had an in-house FLES teacher while others like Lake Travis, employed an itinerant teacher to teach all students on both campuses. Yet other schools, like Manor, had a even more complex arrangement. Grades 4-6 was taught by a FLES teacher. FLES was integrated with the music and art curriculum for Grade 3 and was taught by the music and art teacher, and teacher aides taught students in K-2.

One of the most distinctive feature of FLES programs was the wide variation in the role and teaching load of the teachers within the same school district. In the Latin programs in one of the Austin schools, for example, there was one teacher per grade level. In another school there was a staff of six volunteers for Spanish. In yet

another school the program was taught by the regular classroom teacher if he or she had the necessary qualifications.

The qualifications of FLES teachers also varied a great deal. A common feature, however, was that most teachers had some qualifications in Spanish and an elementary teacher certification. Quite a few teachers also had endorsement in bilingual education. The majority of the teachers were native speakers from a variety of Spanish-speaking countries who were all given three to six months training prior to teaching the FLES classes. In the case of Latin there was one high school Latin teacher who was responsible for training qualified elementary teachers in the skills of teaching Latin.

4. Program Structure

There also existed great variation in time-tabling and time allocation for foreign language instruction. FLES instruction varied from one weekly class of fifteen minutes to ninety minute-classes every day. Table 2 summarizes some of the characteristics of these programs.

Table 2. Program Structure

Length of Classes	Grades	Schools
15 minutes once a week	3-6	Lee
30 minutes once a week	K-3	Manor
	K-5	Summitt
30 minutes twice a week	K-6	Pease
	2-4	Highland Park
30 minutes daily	4-6	Manor
35 minutes twice a week	K-2	All Eanes Schools
35 minutes every other day	3-5	All Eanes Schools
45 minutes once a week	K-2	Highland Park, Doss
45 minutes twice a week	2-5	Doss
45 minutes daily for 3 weeks	K-5	Lake Travis
45 minutes every 4 days	5	Highland Park
90 minutes daily	5-6	Bryker Woods

5. Materials and Teaching Methodologies

The teachers reported using a great deal of supplemental materials, both commercial and teacher-made, in addition to the materials provided by the school. The majority of programs, however, adopted the series *Viva el Español* which the State Board of Education recently recommended. Most teachers found the series very useful since it provided sequencing and structure, included such items as books, cassette tapes, picture and vocabulary cards. In addition, it utilized puppets and recommended such methods as Total Physical Response. It also encouraged the use of songs and student centered activities. The textbooks form part a four-part series intended to provide sequence for FLES programs. They are Viva *el Español, Converso Mucho , Converso Más* and *Ya Comunicando.*

6. Articulation Between Levels

None of the programs had provisions for articulation from elementary to secondary schools, but some allowed for articulation within levels in the same schools. In Manor, for example, the students received instruction until grade 6 and could move directly into Grade 7. At Lake Travis, on the other hand, students received instruction until grade 5 and did not begin language study again until Grade 7. In Eanes, the grade 5 students moved into a twelve-week, grade-six-language discovery program. Likewise, the elementary students in Austin moved directly into a grade-six-discovery program. None of the secondary level language programs assumed any prior language instruction.

7. Funding and Support

Nearly all of the programs indicated a high level of support from parents, administration, community members and other teachers. FLES programs were either funded by the school or by parents. The programs at Eanes, Lake Travis, and Manor and four of the Austin programs are funded by the school. Two Austin programs charged seventy dollars a year for enrollment in one of the programs. Regardless of the source of funding, however, there was general skepticism that many programs may be canceled due to budget cuts and insufficient funding.

8. Evaluation

None of the programs surveyed included any measures for program evaluation. Most of the programs with more than one teacher indicated that they met weekly to discuss any concerns. The Eanes schools appeared to be the only ones that attempted to provide some sort of alignment to ensure standardization of the programs. As for student evaluation, most of the programs reported informal evaluations. The Eanes and the Manor schools were the only ones that attempted to establish some sort of regular evaluation of their students. They included a grade of minus, check or plus on their students report cards based on students' pronunciation, participation and notebook maintenance.

9. Major Problems

In spite of strong enthusiasm and support from community, parents and teachers, most FLES programs experienced problems with funding. As one of the Eanes teachers remarked, foreign language was grouped with the rest of "the specials", which were usually the first programs to be jeopardized in a budget crisis. The second problem mentioned in the data was the lack of adequately trained teachers to run the programs. The third problem dealt with inadequate time in the school day to allow for quality instruction.

After School FLES Programs

Nine schools offered after-school FLES programs. Of these programs, two were offered at Pflugerville schools and seven at Austin schools. There were four different means through which the schools offered these programs: (1) through the support of parents, (2) through community schools, (3) through Austin Parks and Recreation, and (4) through the Independent Foreign Language Schools.

The oldest of the programs was three years old and was taught by a parent in the Austin school district. It was opened to all grade levels with two multi-level

classes which met twice a week for thirty minutes each. The teaching materials, methodology, and sequencing were also drawn from the *Viva el Español* series. The school had future plans to integrate the program into the regular school day .

After-school FLES instruction was also made possible through the extensive Community School network that the county offered. However, only one school in the Austin district participated in this service. This program generally met once a week for four to five weeks and the parents paid nineteen dollars per student for tuition. Teachers were found within the schools and community, and the materials and methods used were also based on the *Viva el Español* series. The third type of after-school FLES program was made possible through one of the Austin Parks and Recreation centers. At the time of this survey, however, there were no schools participating.

The fourth alternative for offering FLES after-school programs was through the International Educational System's (IES) Language Foundation, which is a nonprofit organization with locations in over forty states. All five of the Austin schools offered a program through IES. An interview with the Austin Director of IES revealed that if a school wanted to begin a program, there must be a minimum of seven students. Students were generally divided by grade levels and they met once a week for one hour. The programs lasted from four to eight months, at a cost of thirty-eight dollars a month per student. This money also covered instructional material. The teachers involved in these programs were all native speakers of Spanish with extensive training in methodology. IES also has clearly defined goals, which according to the director are:

(1) To reach all children with the gift of other languages and cultures;
(2) To motivate students to want to speak other languages and to know other cultures;
(3) To support all educational systems (both public and private) and to reinforce the values of global education by means of our language programs;
(4) To help all children enjoy languages and cultures and to develop global awareness;
(5) To develop positive attitudes toward all people.

We highlighted these features of the IES program because several schools are opting to work with IES to provide after-school foreign language study. In addition, the program offered at IES is being used as a model for many of the other programs in Travis County.

SUMMARY

The following conclusions are based upon the data collected in connection with this study. First of all, there existed a small number of FLES programs in the Austin area, and these were concentrated in Travis County. Seventeen percent (17%) of the elementary students had the opportunity to learn a foreign language during regular school hours.

While the majority of programs followed the elementary Spanish learning series adopted by the state, there remained considerable diversity in the way in which the materials and methodologies were adapted to suit the needs of each class. Alterations and supplementation of materials primarily reflected variation in both the amount of time spent per week and the grade levels involved in the programs.

There existed a consensus regarding the goals of the various FLES programs, but no evaluation measures were currently taking place to ascertain whether these goals were in fact being achieved. This was an indication that not only were the FLES programs not fully incorporated into the elementary curriculum, but that they were also not taken as seriously as the other subject areas.

The implementation and subsequent success of the FLES programs relied heavily on parental support. Funding remained the greatest problem facing FLES programs in Austin. Foreign language instruction at the elementary level in Austin was considered to be part of the enrichment curriculum, rather than an essential component of the curriculum.

An overview of the schools offering FLES revealed that the programs were located in schools comprised of a higher than average proportion of Caucasian students. The students in schools that were more ethnically mixed, and/or that had large number of students from lower income families, were not offered access to FLES programs. This fact may be interpreted as example of educational inequality.

Problems identified in the FLES programs in this study were similar to those in other FLES studies, specifically those outlined by Grittner (1991), and cited as the five areas believed to have been the cause of FLES failure in the past. Grittner believed that FLES programs need to address time allocation, teaching methods, teacher preparation, unrealistic program expectations, and lack of articulation. These observations were also made by Met (1991), Lipton (1991), and Schinke-Llano (1985).

RECOMMENDATIONS

What are some possible solutions? Some of the recommendations for FLES programs in Travis County demand attention by administrative bodies while others have to be resolved through professional and pedagogic approaches. For example, while Met (1991), correctly identified TIME and INTENSITY as the two most important elements for quality FLES programs, these issues can only be addressed by those school officials responsible for course scheduling. The perennial complaint is an already overcrowded timetable. An overall restructuring of the time-table to include FLES programs is possible only by joint negotiation and cooperation.

The second recommendation dealing with articulation may be more easily rectified. Since schools offering FLES programs are a part of the school district, it may be feasible for the district to consider employing a FLES specialist, whose main tasks will be to coordinate the programs, to design evaluation procedures, to supervise instruction and to work with teacher training centers to provide in-service and pre-service courses for teachers. Part of that specialist's job will be to prepare a sample resource manual to be made available to school districts. This manual will include sample units, with accompanying sample lessons, activities and visuals. Such instructional material should be regularly evaluated.

Linguistic proficiency and cultural awareness goals at each grade must be established to appropriately measure students' progress, both collectively and individually. Standardizing instructional material may be the first step to designing appropriate forms of assessment of students' competencies and proficiency levels. The study revealed that those schools using the State Board of Education recommended texts reported the most structured FLES programs in Spanish. FLES studies have shown that teachers need all the help they can get in terms of

instructional material (Met, 1989; Pesola, 1991; Lipton, 1991). Standardizing the texts or establishing standards for instructional material not only facilitates assessment/testing but also facilitate articulation at multi-level entry points.

While schools must be left free to decide on specifics of their own programs, it is essential for them to resolve several questions, for example, for whom the program is intended, the desired outcomes, the parents' wishes, the resources and choices of available languages. Foremost among the individuals who will have strong opinions about language choices are the teachers and ethnic groups in the community who may want their language to be the one that their descendants learn in school. Parents, business leaders and other community members must have input in deciding language offerings. Some FLES educators believe that the language does not matter since any language can fulfill the benefits of global awareness, enhanced basic skills, identification with other cultures, self-esteem and communicative language skills. One can reasonably argue that the case of Latin seems questionable. What is more important is that all involved be included in the decision making process.

Finally FLES programs themselves need to be evaluated. The FLES program Evaluation Inventory (FPEI), designed by Heining-Boynton (1991) can serve as a model. The questionnaire in this inventory is short (12-20 items) and refers to program philosophy, training, time consumption, materials, and classroom atmosphere among other features. This model has been tried and has proven to be very effective (Heining-Boynton, 1991).

CONCLUSION

This study was undertaken to increase our knowledge of foreign language education at the elementary school level in the city of Austin, with special focus on the Travis County area where there was the greatest FLES activity. We are aware that there are exceptional FLES programs throughout the state of Texas, and we are also aware of the existence of the Texas FLES* Institute whose mission is to provide teachers and administrators with the skills and knowledge and hands-on activities needed for successful FLES* programs.

The June 1995 FLES four-day intensive workshop to be held in Dallas and organized by the national FLES* Institute of Texas is yet another of the institute's efforts to extend FLES awareness and promote FLES programs throughout the state. At the same time we are also aware that for many schools FLES is just another attraction, another point on the checklist that is used to describe the quality of schools and school districts. While there are laudable attempts by national and state bodies to increase the number of quality programs, unless these are monitored, supervised and evaluated and unless the teachers are trained and duly remunerated and the students properly assessed, such curriculum offerings remain nothing more than items on an inventory list for a privileged few.

In spite of the lack of a foreign language requirement for all students, Texas seems well prepared for the implementation of the National Standards in Foreign Language Education. The State Board of Education in July 1992 approved the elements of the standard curriculum to be taught to all students in all public schools. Revision of those elements that call for the integration of language skills and a new description of language proficiency levels will be implemented by 1996. Many of these goals are similar to those outlined in the National Standards in

Foreign Language Education. For example, the Texas Essential Elements stress oral communication, written communication and knowledge of another culture and language. The goals of the National Standards also include communication in a language other than English, knowledge of other cultures, and the ultimate ability to participate in a multilingual global society. It should not be difficult then for Texas to set in motion effective administrative and professional means for enacting the national goals for all its children regardless of race, color, economic class, or creed.

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REVIEWS

Teaching ESL Writing

Joy M. Reid. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Regents/Prentice Hall, 1993. Pp. 354.

According to the latest statistics, about 450,000 international students are enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities. When the large number of recent immigrants who attend these institutions is added to this number, ESL students undoubtedly form a significant percentage of the U.S. campus population. All ESL students, like their native-speaker (NS) counterparts, are required to take Freshman English and other writing courses.

In these courses, ESL students are often placed in classes with native-speaker students, and in some institutions, even compelled to compete with native-speakers at exit examinations. The required writing courses and the placement procedure are probably unique to U.S. post-secondary education. (For instance, it is highly unlikely that foreign students learning the Japanese language in Japan would be placed in classes with native-speakers of Japanese, or foreign students learning German in Germany with native-speakers of German.) In recent publications, ESL writing specialists such as Braine (1994) and Silva (1994), among others, have argued for the placement of ESL students in writing courses especially designed for these students.

However, colleges and universities face two problems in teaching writing to ESL students. The first is the inability to hire qualified personnel, especially in times of budgetary restraints. As a result, teachers who have no training in teaching ESL students often find themselves given this responsibility. The second problem is the shortage of ESL teachers who have the training to teach writing. This is a direct result of the long neglect of writing in graduate programs in TESOL; courses such as "Teaching ESL Writing" are a fairly new phenomenon and not included in all these programs,

In an attempt to confront these problems, two ESL writing specialists have recently published two landmark volumes. The first is Ilona Leki's *Understanding ESL Writers* (1992) and the second is Joy Reid's *Teaching ESL Writing* (1993). While Leki's book is meant both as a theoretical and pedagogical introduction to the field, *Teaching ESL Writing* is written mainly for graduate students who are planning to teach ESL writing at post-secondary level.

Teaching ESL Writing consists of ten chapters, a useful annotated bibliography, and a 45-page Works Cited section, perhaps the most comprehensive in the field. At the end of each chapter, discussion questions and topics for reflective writing are included. The topics covered in the chapters range from an "Overview of Native English Speaker (NES) Composition" (Chapter 1) to "Teaching ESL Writing: Becoming a Professional" (Chapter 1).

The other chapters deal with topics such as an overview of ESL composition, pedagogical issues in ESL writing, curriculum and syllabus design, handling the first week of an ESL writing course, collaborative and cross-cultural activities, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), responding to student writing, and evaluation of writing. The sequencing of chapters reflects the close link between ESL and NES composition, and enables readers with no prior knowledge of TESOL and/or the